

STUNG

BEING THE TALE OF GUM SHOE, THE LADY KILLER AND THE STRONG LADY

By HENRY OYEN

THE vastness of the difference often lying between the nature of the Cause and the Effect seldom is appreciated. Which sometimes is well. If Maggie Walsh—who was and who now is somebody else—had known how it all began it is highly probable that there would have been a different and, perhaps, a less happy story to tell. But Miss Walsh didn't know and Mr. Wilson didn't know; only Gum Shoe knew, and, for reasons which shall appear later, Gum Shoe is extremely chary when it comes to the telling thereof.

Mr. Wilson was the new paying member of the Joyce family. He had the best front room and an egg for breakfast every morning; and he transgressed beyond all reason the bounds of conduct proper to his environs.

He called Gum Shoe "Harry, my boy." This was wrong. Also foolhardy. Call a welter-weight "Cutie" to his face, offer the crossing policeman a testimonial for gentleness, but do not, upon penalty of creating an enemy of a scornful, virulent breed, say "Harry, my boy," to a red haired newspaper office messenger of three years' unholy experience and a reputation such as wins and holds for one the distinguished appellation of "Gum Shoe." For while the parish register positively demonstrated that our hero was properly labeled "Harry Joyce," this is a mere incident. He was Gum Shoe to everybody save his mother, and Gum Shoe he would be and nothing else.

"Harry, my boy," said the unknowing boarder, and

Gum Shoe, choking down the evening meal in bitter silence, lurched out of the flat into the well smoked evening air, dizzy with anger and dry in the throat with thirst for the blood of the new Mr. Wilson.

"Harry, my boy!" he spluttered out on the front steps. "Harry, my boy! For the love o' heaven, why didn't he say 'Clarence, me dear,' and be done with it. Huh! Dat's wot we get for advertising a nice, quit home for a gentleman. Gentleman my eye! A sissy, that's wot he is. A hair oil, celluloid collar sissy."

Having delivered himself thus Gum Shoe lighted a cigarette and expertly shot a beam of smoke through the hole where his front teeth once had existence, and of the contempt and indignation in the action no man may hope to tell in common words.

"Harry, my boy!" he repeated in dazed fashion as if the thing were incredible. "Wouldn't that—wouldn't that ree-form yuh?"

Then he stopped and sat listening in disgusted amazement.

It was summer and the windows of the Joyce home were wide open. Out from the kitchen came the sounds of Mrs. Joyce removing the traces of supper, and in company with these homely noises came intermittent peals of laughter, female laughter. The laugh of Mrs. Joyce was a thing worth going far to hear; even the sardonic, sophisticated Gum Shoe ordinarily found joy in its cheerfulness, but now he felt that the blitheness of his mother was mockery of the harshest sort. The new boarder, the disgustingly proper Mr. Wilson, was assisting Mrs. Joyce in wiping the dishes and telling her about "something that happened down at the store today." Mrs. Joyce, apparently, thought the something funny.

"Deh tin horn!" Gum Shoe spat upon a lower step. "Deh hair oil, celluloid collar! Listen to him conning the old lady, will yuh? Dat's deh way wid dese gicks; dey can't travel wid deh men so dey fool wid deh skirts—like dey was the real thing. A lady killer, eh? Well, he don't fool muh—not after what he called me in there."

And the thirst for the gore of Mr. Wilson grew deeper within the throat of Gum Shoe, and all the more did he thirst because as the world stood with him at that time he knew that the probability of obtaining satisfactory revenge existed not upon his horizon. For Mrs. Joyce had been overjoyed at the acquisition of Mr. Wilson as a paying member of the family and would brook no "nonsense" toward him.

"It's not ev'ry day that you find a gentleman who can pay," said she with a sigh which told of many bitter disappointments. "No, nor ev'ry week, nayther, and so, Harry, unless you want to bring more gray hairs to yer poor old mother's head ye must be nice to him. We must both be nice to him. He's payin' fer a home with us, and a home we've got to make it fer him. So, Harry, treat him with respect, and behave yerself all the time—er shelp me, boy, I'll break yer back, ye hear?"

"Fine!" groaned Gum Shoe. "Fine for muh! Here a gick comes along and hands me, 'Harry, my boy,' and all I can do is to look pleasant and act 's if it tasted good. O, wot's deh use? I'm stung, that's all, I'm stung."

So he slid skillfully down the well worn step rail to the walk and moved down the street, the spirit of a ravenous young wolf in his heart and a streak of red in his gray Irish eyes, seeking any one of three certain young men who stripped within ten pounds of his weight and with whom the question of fistic superiority never had been definitely settled. Action for his anger he might not have on Mr. Wilson, he had decided, and the instinct of his race held true; if he could not fight "the" man the next one would have to do.

Gum Shoe would have had his fight that night by all normal indications. It was such a night as breeds trouble in the crowded districts. The air was heavily warm; the street was so well filled with people that the smell of perspiration was the strongest odor in evidence; a careful pedestrian had need to keep a sharp eye for the babies underfoot, and the green screen doors of the saloons slammed with the regularity of ticking clocks, white streaks of foam upon the sidewalks marked the course of too hurriedly carried beer cans; "Old Man" Hayes at his window croaked, "O! tel yuh 'twas buhfore the Haymarket riot he died," and the three young men for whom Gum Shoe sought were gathered at the next corner. Yes, Gum Shoe should have had his fight, but fate was in a complex mood and ruled otherwise.

It was the sight of Maggie Walsh that proved fatal in this instance. Maggie Walsh, the big hearted and great bodied neighbor but two doors removed from

the Joyces when she was at home, which was seldom, Miss Walsh's vocation being of a nature that required long absences from the shelter of the Walsh front flat. On these absences the name of Maggie strangely became Mlle. Hectore, and her title from plain Miss changed to that of "Champion Lady Weight Lifter of the World." Maggie Walsh was a "strong lady." But not the conventional stage "strong lady" was Maggie, for unlike some of her profession her strength did not desert her when she left the stage, but everywhere that she went the strength of her arm and character left its impress.

At home she acted as sort of assistant mother to all the child ridden women in the block, guardian to half a dozen small children who otherwise would have been quite unguarded, unofficial washwoman to several families which otherwise would have gone quite unwashed, and general conservator of the peace of a Saturday night when laden with strong and smelling drinks sundry heads of families in the block were inspired with a simple desire to beat the wives of their bosoms.

Gum Shoe worshipped her for her physical prowess and for her ability to get along without any "gentleman company." Being of an age and type to which the opposite sex is a superfluity he despised with a feel-

sire which burned in his (Gum Shoe's) bosom for revenge on the new boarder, the Harry-my-boy Mr. Wilson? Naught at all. To the ordinary type of mind such connection must be invisible, or vague at best. To the Gum Shoe intellect it was as obvious as the car tracks in the middle of the street. This demonstrates the superiority of the Gum Shoe type of mind as well as the importance of fate having proper material where-with to work her destinies.

Gum Shoe, at the sight of Maggie Walsh's generous form and the sound of her heart filled voice, had one ray of light, and he saw what he saw, and at once his brain began to work busily with an idea. And presently he saw that it was a great idea that had come to him, and soon all was clear and beautiful before him, and he was filled with a desire to swear for joy.

"Me grouching!" he said instead. "Me grouching? I should say not. I was just blue, that's all. I thought yuh was still out of town."

For this the kindly Maggie promptly knocked him off the step, and Gum Shoe came back grinning, for the beauty of his great idea was growing upon him with each second, and Maggie, she who administered the friendly cuff, was to be the means to the altogether delectable end.

How the feat was accomplished is something that only Gum Shoe himself may explain, but presently when the night had grown a little older and the jam on the doorstep had thinned down to two, Miss Walsh, "strong lady," found herself venting her opinions on "gentleman company," "lady killer," and similar institutions to an incredibly eager and appreciative audience consisting exclusively of Gum Shoe.

Miss Walsh's opinions on these subjects were of a single nature and emphatically expressed, and they caused the rapt Gum Shoe to rock with poorly concealed joy. Controlling himself he cramped his legs up under him in great comfort and said cautiously: "I seen one of these masher guys get pinched today."

"Ah, yah?" The "strong lady" was mildly interested.

"Eh, yah. Adams an' Wabash. Been following a

pany him on a little stroll about the neighborhood.

"So's you'll be acquainted 'round here," he explained.

"Thank you, Harry, my boy."

"And I'll show you some swell girls, too. You don't want to forget that there are some swell lookers around here, and you want to know 'em."

"Why—er—well, now, Harry, my boy, I hardly—"

"Aw, cut that. I know a champeen wit' the ladies when I see one."

"Now, Harry?"

"You're it," Gum Shoe grinned. Mr. Wilson took the grin for one of admiration. "You like them, and they don't exactly hate you. Am I right? Own up, now."

"Well, I must say, Harry. This is—"

"Fine! Now you an' me fer a little stroll, sure."

And out they went, and Gum Shoe carefully, slowly

led Mr. Wilson past Maggie Walsh as she sat with her arms filled with small children on a bench in the little park, and it is to be written that Maggie Walsh, arrayed in the soft white raiment of a young woman 'n sum-

mer-time and mothering several strange youngsters of various shades and sizes, was a sight calculated to create some impression upon even the most hardened and calculated of male mankind. And Mr. Wilson was neither collared or hardened. He had a tender heart in his bosom, and he was 32, and, he realized now, growing more and more lonely every day.

"That," volunteered Gum Shoe, "that's Maggie Walsh."

"Is it, indeed?" said Mr. Wilson.

"Eh yah. She lives two doors down from us."

"A near neighbor, then."

"And she was askin the other day, she was askin who was the Joyce's new boarder?"

"Now, Harry?"

"Dat's right. She wanted to know who you was, an' all about you. Yes, she did, on the square."

Then followed the silence which covers crises. Gum Shoe breathed in small breaths. The crucial moment for the great idea was at hand. Would Mr. Wilson do his part toward the idea? Would he or would he not swallow the proffered and tempting hook?

"Well, Harry," said Mr. Wilson, indulgently, "don't you think you could arrange affairs so that the young lady may satisfy her curiosity about your new boarder?"

"Arrange it?" Gum Shoe laughed for two good reasons. "Arrange it? Why, say, she's my friend; you come wit' me, that's all."

That next evening is memorable in the annals of the block for the meeting of Maggie Walsh and Mr. Wilson. True to his word, Gum Shoe piloted the new boarder into the lair of the "strong lady," which was the Walsh sitting room.

"Maggie," said he, "this is me friend, Mr. Wilson."

Mr. Wilson looked at Miss Walsh. Miss Walsh looked at Mr. Wilson. Mr. Wilson saw that she was even better to look upon than he had suspected. In fact, never in his life had he looked upon the face of a woman which told him the things that this one did. And Miss Walsh saw how he looked at her.

But Gum Shoe had faded away with his last word, and saw this not. Outside he doubled over as if suffering severe pain amidships.

"It's a shame to do it, O, what a shame!" he chortled. "Wot will she do wit' him when he begins to get flosky? What will she do? O, gracious! But he's got it comin'. Called me 'Harry, my boy' O, sure, he's got it comin'—all that he gets."

And though his softer self prompted the fear that his mode of revenge possibly was too cruel he steered himself with many repetitions of the phrase that burned, and slept in peace.

This is a busy world for a messenger in the service of a great daily newspaper. Nations fall out and threaten to go to war and make up; presidents are nominated and elected or defeated; kings die, or marry, or fail to do either; great fortunes spring up in a night; great names come down in the same period; pugilists threaten to fight; Pittsburg continues to produce millionaires, and Mr. Roosevelt is ever busy, and it all comes out on the little boy in blue who runs here and there during his waking hours and the block says him only in the daylight when he dragged himself home from the night's work, and when in the afternoon he went forth again, refreshed after a day's sleep.

So of the things which took place in the block after nightfall—and it is there that the block begins to live—he knew nothing. It was a blank space for him so far as home and neighborhood were concerned. The hectic business of the office, the white heat interest which surcharged the air in which he moved, held him in thrall, just as it held many stronger, older, and wiser men than Gum Shoe. He was in "the game," and he played it with all the fervor of his fiery constitution, and thus played "the game" gives neither time nor energy nor desire for revenge or love or life or death—only time and energy and desire to be able to play "the game" well and to see it to the end.

Eventually the king was dead—at all events the climax was over—and Gum Shoe went home to sleep for fifteen hours at a stretch and to awaken to renewed interest in the things about him.

They thought of his conspiracy against Mr. Wilson, an promptly he went out into the night licking his chops in anticipation of the feast which he knew to be in store for him. Straight for the sitting room of the Walsh family he steered, blind to everything about him, thinking only of the tale to be heard there of Mr. Wilson's discomfiture. Confidently he stalked into the little hall and knocked and waited a second before entering.

It was dark in the hall, and in the sitting room the light was turned far down, and out through the open door came words. Soft words they were, low words, fit words for the time and the place. But they fell upon the ears of Gum Shoe like a slap.

"My darling?"

Gum Shoe froze stiff in his horror. The voice was that of a woman. She was speaking to a man.

"Yes, honey," Gum Shoe's under jaw sagged loosely.

"Martin, dear, have you thought this thing over seriously? Are you sure that you want me? Sure?"

"My dear girl?"

"And you always will want me and will be good to me?"

"Margaret, I swear that I will make you a good husband."

"And isn't it funny to think of it," continued Miss Maggie Walsh to Mr. Wilson after the proper pause, "that if it hadn't been for that little red haired imp of a Harry Joyce we might never have met?"

"Well, bless Harry, then."

"Yes, bless him for giving me—"

But Gum Shoe shrieked one single word, "Stung!" and ran away into the outer darkness.

A block away he stopped before the open, greasy wagon of Ganzel, the fatted fish man, who was his friend—sometimes.

"Say, Ganzel," he demanded, surreptitiously reaching for a small fried perch, "wot's wrong wit' women folks? What's wrong wit' 'em, anyhow?"

"Some off dem do not bring up dere kids as dey should," replied Ganzel, casually removing the perch from the danger zone.

"Aw, I don't mean nudders. I mean girls—about fellows. Dey—dey're mussy. Foolish—bugs—like babies. Dey ought 'a have somebody to take care of 'em, dat's what dey ought."

"Yah," said Ganzel, "so dey ought. Or somebody fer dem to take care off. And so dey do—dem as are lucky."

ing too deep for words the girl who must have a "fellow," and correspondingly respected Maggie who, he knew, despised the aforesaid custom as deeply as did himself. Therefore on this troubled night when Maggie called out his name from the Walsh doorstep Gum Shoe met her with a shout of joy and made room for himself on the doorstep by the simple means of pulling a small boy off by the legs.

"What you grouching about, Gum Shoe?" queried Maggie.

"Me grouching?" said Gum Shoe, sitting down. "I should say not."

And now witness what an inadequate, incomplete force is fate, after all, unless she be ably abetted and assisted by those upon whom her attentions are bestowed. For what would have mattered the machinations of the fate that placed "the strong lady" in the path of Gum Shoe on this evening had not Gum Shoe been of a kind gifted with a vision capable of establishing in one sharp, blinding flash a connection between the notable qualities of Maggie Walsh and the red deer-

fairly for two blocks. She don't care for him much; don't want him 'round, see. When she picks up her skirts and goes fer the L stairs Mr. Mash steps up, bat off, and gives her the eye. Deh fairy screams, and Carney from the crossing gets on the job. Bing! Zing! Slam! An' the fairy faints half tuh deat."

"Huh!"

"Fainted, did she?"

"Sure, dead away."

"Huh!" The "strong lady" snorted from the bottom of her well developed lungs. "Those fainting ladies don't make much of a hit with me."

"No?"

"Nope—sire—ee."

"I suppose you wouldn't never faint, er scream, er nudder if one of these Foxy Freddie got real flosky wit' you, eh? O, no, I suppose not."

"Who, me?" demanded Miss Walsh. "What are you talking about, son? Do you s'pose I'm such a fool as to faint or scream over anything—not to mention one of those little two-for-a-cent things in pants? You're silly. I'd like to see myself doing that for any man."

"You don't like men, do yuh?" Gum Shoe's tone was gently sneering.

The "strong lady" laughed and patted Gum Shoe on the head.

"I like you, Gum Shoe," said she. "You're a good kid and turn your envelope over to your mother without opening it."

"Aw, I mean you don't like men—like most girls does."

"Gum Shoe, I'll tell you; I like 'em—to keep away from me."

"Den you wouldn't like to have one of these lady killers try to make a hit wit' you, eh?"

"Who, me? Why, yes, I would. I'd be glad to have one try it—terribly glad."

"Why?" asked Gum Shoe in awed whispers. "What 'ud yuh do?"

"Well, it would depend upon the make of the brute. If he was a little fellow I'd do the overhead swing with him and dump him into the nearest street cleaning cart. If he was a big one I guess I'd roll him on the stage—pavement, I mean."

Gum Shoe wriggled in the pangs of unholy joy. "And if he was a medium sized, sissy sort of fellow?" he screamed.

"O, the cleaning cart for all lightweights," replied the "strong lady," yawning.

Gum Shoe fell off the steps in his agony of happiness.

"Max," said he, "Mag, if I hadn't been broken in love in me early yuh! I'd marry your sure."

Mrs. Joyce was much surprised and pleased at the conduct of her son at supper next evening. Gum Shoe was all that a son should be toward the paying member of the family. Once or twice he went so far as to whisper something that sounded suspiciously like "Yessir," and he wound up the evening in a triumph for his mother by suggesting that Mr. Wilson accom-

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